

Walking the Murals

September 17th was the second DominGO event held on Park Street. DominGO is an open streets festival sponsored by Hartford HealthCare and the City of Hartford where the street is shut down so pedestrians and cyclists can enjoy live music, food, and fun activities. SINA took this opportunity to organize an event on Park Street celebrating the completion of SINA's most recent mural on Park and Cedar Street and honoring the 85 other people nominated as heroes over the last three years who didn't get enough votes to appear in a mural. The names of those 85 people will be painted in a mural on the corner of Broad and Park. The event started with remarks by Gladys Rivera and Sammy Vega, the two people honored in the mural on Cedar Street. Both expressed gratitude for the support they received from the wider community and reiterated the importance of celebrating history and culture. Sammy Vega was given a memorable welcome when Jeffrey Dressler, a local lawyer and mentor of Sammy, rang a boxing ringside bell with a hammer. He then welcomed Sammy in a voice mimicking a professional announcer, listing off all the titles Sammy won on his path to becoming the nation's junior Olympic boxing champion.

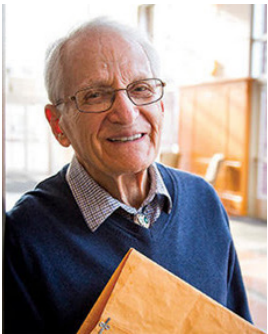
Jeffrey Dressler got a chance to speak later himself as someone who was nominated as a hero for the murals. More than a dozen people spoke. From pastors to radio personalities, to people who have given their lives to serving youth, the nominees shared their inspiring remarks to the crowd of over 75 people listening from Park Street.

The event also served as the official launch for Nuestra Historia, SINA's bilingual walking tour of Frog Hollow created in partnership with students at Trinity College. While the tour is available to anyone with a smartphone or computer, two large groups have already enjoyed formal walking tours utilizing the route and information. One tour was sponsored by the Frog Hollow Neighborhood Revitalization Zone for the benefit of Connecticut Children's employees and was focused on local murals. Another was part of Trinity's orientation for 30 first-year students, called Hartford is Home. The tour was led by SINA's Logan Singerman and Trinity's Liliana Polley. Students took a walking tour up Broad Street up to the state capital and then toured various parts of the city on a bus tour the following day. In a survey following the experience, the students expressed an increased appreciation for Hartford's assets, culture, and history. The walking tour has also been used by other Trinity courses and programs and caught the attention of the Lt. Governor's Director of Communications who after learning about the tour chose our mural on Wolcott Street as the place for a press conference celebrating Hispanic Heritage Month. The Lt. Governor and their delegation then took a portion of the walking tour seeing the first three murals on Park and Broad Street. Take the tour by visiting sinainc.org/nuestrahistoria.



About SINA

Since its founding in 1977 SINA has worked with residents and community organizations on issues such as affordable rental housing, education, public safety, homeownership and employment. With nearly 100 homes built, a thriving Walk to Work Program, and the creation of community gardens and murals, its visible impact in the Frog Hollow, Barry Square and South Green neighborhoods has been significant. SINA continues operations today in offices at 207 Washington Street. For more information call (860) 493-1618.



Remembering Ivan Backer

SINA is a partnership between Connecticut Children's, Hartford Hospital and Trinity College. SINA's mission is to work cooperatively with community stakeholders to restore economic vitality and improve the quality of life for the people who live, work, play, and study in the neighborhoods of South Central Hartford.





Remembering Ivan Backer, Activist and Innovator for Social Justice

Ivan Backer, who passed away on July 1, 2023, wondered in his book, *My Train To Freedom*, why he was spared when so many millions died in the Nazi holocaust. He writes, “Joining the quest and struggle for social justice gradually evolved as my response to that question that haunted me, and I became committed to activism in different professional guises”. The people whose lives were touched by Ivan Backer might respond in different ways to his poignant query, but no one would question that his life had great purpose.

Ivan was compassionate, creative, and a champion for justice throughout his life. Ivan was instrumental in the creation of Southside Institutions Neighborhood Alliance (SINA) in 1977. Without his years of building relationships in the neighborhood while working at Trinity College and his principled advocacy, SINA might not exist. Ivan was one of SINA’s first Executive Directors and the longest serving director to date.

Born in 1929 in Prague, Czechoslovakia, Ivan was one of the 669 Czech children who were saved from the Holocaust by Sir Nicholas Winton’s “Kindertransport” in 1939. After escaping the Nazis, Ivan’s long life was dedicated to service. He came to the United States via England in 1944 and earned a BA in History from Moravian College, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania and Masters degrees from Union and General Theological Seminaries in New York City.



Ivan made Hartford his home in 1969, when he was hired by Trinity College. He became their first Director of Community Affairs and then the Director of Graduate and Special Programs, where he helped develop a master’s program in Public Policy Studies. His tireless work created the foundation for the engaged campus community Trinity College has today. He remained a colleague, mentor, and friend to faculty and staff for years after his retirement.



Ivan spearheaded many community-building activities, including the formation of a neighborhood issues committee with Hartford Hospital and the Institute of Living. That effort resulted in the creation of SINA, which today also includes Connecticut Children’s, and in 1979 he became the organization’s President and CEO. While at SINA, he was instrumental in the creation of the Southside News, later renamed the Hartford News. Ivan was a pioneer in the movement to bring hospitals and universities together to invest in the development of their surrounding communities for the benefit of the people who live there. He developed in Hartford many of the initiatives that have become the defining elements of this movement, hiring from the local community, purchasing from local vendors and creating opportunities for employees from the hospitals and the College to live in the community. He also laid the foundation for SINA to develop affordable housing programs in Frog Hollow and educational incentives for



Hartford school children. Today, the partnership continues to provide its three member institutions a vehicle to focus on improving homeownership, economic stability, and the health and wellbeing of families in South Central Hartford.

Ivan was revered by many in Hartford and beyond. Ted Carroll, longtime president of Leadership Greater Hartford, says “I met Ivan more than 40 years ago, after I first moved to Hartford. From the start, I was impressed with the way he reached out to the community, forged alliances and got things done. He became one of my most important role models - and a dear friend.”

Luz Conde, of Forge City Works, worked with Ivan at Southside News and then at SINA. She calls Ivan “the most influential mentor of my professional life” who taught her the “ins and outs of nonprofits, and why working at one is about those you help and how that makes you feel at the end of your day.” Luz remembers “I met Ivan in 1981 during my internship at Southside News. He would come in with his blue beret that matched his blue eyes and I remember thinking “this is a real beatnik.” He always took the time to speak to me, which was a big deal to a high school student. A few months later I grew to dread him and his RED grease pencil because he corrected every misspelling and every error in punctuation or grammar.”



Years later Luz happily went to work with Ivan at SINA, where she continued to be impressed. She explains “He valued my opinion and respected my perspective. I respected him and admired his ability to communicate with others. It didn’t matter if he didn’t agree with you, because he took the time to listen, making you feel heard and seen. I remember a heated conversation he had with a Frog Hollow community activist and businessman about a Park Street development project. They had strongly conflicting opinions and were very loud. I remember thinking ‘this isn’t going to end well,’ but I was wrong. They talked, listened, disagreed and in the end were able to walk away respecting each other’s perspective – with an agreeable compromise. This is something that I saw over and over again with Ivan.”

Luz further reflected, “When Ivan retired from SINA, I saw that his version of retirement was to volunteer and continue to serve others. I know that is something I will do as well, thanks to Ivan’s influence in my life.”



Eddie Perez, former community organizer, Trinity College employee, nonprofit leader, SINA president and Hartford mayor, worked closely with Ivan for years. He recalls Ivan as “a strong warrior for people to have a voice. He made sure they were listened to and got angry if it didn’t happen. Ivan drew the line if people were being marginalized, and that line was thick and strong.”

“Ivan was always willing to let someone else take the credit, if it got the desired results,” Eddie explains, and “he was happy to take a back seat as long as the bus was going in the right direction, and everybody who should be on the bus was on it. Ivan’s work in Frog Hollow gave him fulfillment, and he was at it a long time.

His work was constant and rewarding to the community. Ivan was a leader among leaders.”

Even in retirement Ivan continued his activism for human rights and dedication to community service. He founded and taught in the Hartford area Adult Learning Program (ALP), worked with Cinestudio, and created a scholarship program that SINA still administers. His book, *My Train to Freedom: A Jewish Boy’s Journey from Nazi Europe to a Life of Activism*, describes escaping Nazi occupation, wrestling with faith, and committing his life to the cause of justice. The Hartford Foundation for Public Giving produced a video about Ivan, and in 2003 Moravian College honored Ivan with the Haupert Humanitarian Award for lifetime achievement.

A memorial event for Ivan took place on November 5, 2023, at Trinity College. The event coincided with the unveiling of a mural of Ivan on SINA’s building, visible from Washington Street (see story below.)



Ivan Backer Mural



In partnership with some of Ivan Backer’s friends and family, SINA facilitated the creation of a mural in his honor. It will be located on the chimney of SINA and unveiled close to Ivan’s memorial service. It was created by a Jewish artist living in Windsor, Sophie Groenstein who consulted with many of Ivan’s friends and colleagues to include elements in the design that convey important aspects of Ivan’s life.

In addition to a large image of Ivan’s face, the mural includes a train going over a bridge which is symbolic of his escape from the Nazis, refers to his book title, and is also the title of a poem he wrote. He found himself traveling on trains at many key junctures in his life. The train is going over a bridge since Ivan was committed to building bridges to benefit communities excluded from resources. The design contains references to healthcare and to students, to suggest the SINA institutions Ivan brought together.

It also has butterflies and flowers, as Ivan was an avid gardener. He developed this habit as a child, when he was sent to English farms to avoid bombs during the Blitz of London. The gardening images combine to suggest how important Ivan felt it was “to plant seeds” of understanding and tolerance.

There is an effort to rename College Terrace to Ivan Backer Way. The street sign in the mural is meant to call the viewer to follow Ivan’s example and live life as he did. Ivan was always asking “why am I here? Why was I saved?” He determined that he was intended to work for human rights and civil rights, to help bridge the divides between people. We hope that in honoring Ivan this way, it will inspire more people to work for those ideals.